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Supplicatory Voices: Genre Properties of the 1692 Petitions in the Salem Witch-Trials

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Supplicatory Voices: Genre Properties of the 1692 Petitions in the Salem Witch-Trials¹

MATTI PEIKOLA

1. Introduction

On Saturday, June 25, 1692, the recently appointed governor of Massachusetts, Sir William Phips, issued an order for the arrest of the Reverend William Milborne, a Baptist minister in Boston. The reason for this action was the circulation of two documents that Milborne, upon his interrogation, had admitted to have written. According to Phips, the documents were “Seditious and Scandalous Papers or writings” which contained “very high Reflections upon the Administrations of Publick Justice within this their Majesties Province” (Rosenthal et al. 2009: 399). As further stated in the governor’s order, one of the documents had been signed by Milborne and several other persons; the other document was evidently unsigned and anonymous.

The originals of both documents written by Milborne have subsequently been lost. A nineteenth-century transcript of one of them survives, however, and is included in the recent edition of the *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (Rosenthal et al. 2009: 399; henceforth *RSWH*). To a modern reader, there is an interesting contrast between the radical contents of the document and the form adopted for their expression. Although the document questions the very foundations of the Salem trials by discrediting the legal validity of the so-called spectral evidence for detecting witches, Milborne does not express his criticism in the polemical manner characteristic of, say, a sermon or a tract. Instead, he has chosen to present it in a highly deferential manner, in the form of a petition addressed to the “General Assembly of the Province of ye Massachusetts Bay” by “several Inhabitants of the Province”. The addressee of the document is characterised in highly respectful terms as “Grave”, “Juditious” and “honorable”; it is said to be in the possession of “grace” and its judgements are described as “solid”. The anonymous petitioners, for their part, are portrayed as submissive. The adjective “humble” and the corresponding adverb “humbly” are used to depict their status and actions; their request to the addressee to reconsider the validity of spectral evidence is presented as the only possible course of action for dutiful subjects to take in the circumstances.

These two features – the deferential portrayal of the addressee and the submissive stance assumed by the writer – belong to the general characteristics of historical petitionary discourse (see e.g. Zaeske 2003: 3; Held 2010: 196–197). They are commonly present, for example, in the late medieval English parliamentary petitions, Tudor petitionary letters and early nineteenth-century American antislavery petitions studied respectively by Gwilyn Dodd (2007), James Daybell (2006), and Susan Zaeske (2003). On the one hand, the widespread use of these features no doubt reflects their conventional status as elements regularly taught for example in epistolary and notarial manuals, and thereby generally mastered by professional writers of petitionary texts (for such manuals and their influence, see e.g. Richardson 2007). On the other hand, it is also evident that the presence of the features in petitionary writing is linked with the communicative setting and purpose of such texts. Although the primary texts discussed by Dodd, Daybell

and Zaeske belong to different professional or disciplinary domains and historical periods, they are all written requests addressed to a superior by an individual person or a group in a socially or legally subordinate position – i.e. a setting invariably characterised by an asymmetric power relationship between the participants (see Held 2010: 195). Dodd's material consists of requests addressed to the king by his subjects in the context of parliament; Daybell's petitionary letters were sent by women writers to their patrons; and Zaeske's petitioners were female American citizens addressing the Congress.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the communicative properties of a set of twenty-one petitions written in the context of the Salem witch-trials in 1692, including the surviving petition of the Reverend Milborne, within the genre-theoretical framework provided by the research of Vijay K. Bhatia. According to Bhatia, genres may be viewed as "recognizable communicative events, characterised by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the [...] community in which they regularly occur" (Bhatia 2004: 23). While genres and their subgenres are primarily associated with specific disciplinary or professional domains, such as law or medicine, Bhatia's model also allows for the existence of super genres or, as he calls them, "genre colonies", which cut across genres belonging to different domains. The colonies may be viewed as groupings of genres with a largely shared communicative purpose; some of their members may also be hybrids exploiting features of genres from more than one domain (ibid. 58).

Within Bhatia's framework, the 1692 petition of the Reverend Milborne and the various documents with a largely similar communicative purpose examined by Dodd, Daybell, Zaeske and others could provisionally be viewed as members of a colony which consists of several different petitionary genres: legislative, epistolary, judicial and so on (cf. Daybell 2006: 232). It might be rewarding to trace the complex historical development of these petitionary genres and ways they have influenced each other. Here the research of Thomas Kohnen (2001) on the text-typological development of parliamentary petitions and statutes in English has pinpointed some areas where linguistic change has taken place in these documents. That one should ideally also take into account the influence of international chancery models on the generic similarities of petitionary texts is convincingly demonstrated by Gudrun Held's (2010) comparison of medieval Anglo-Norman and Italian petitions in the pragmatic framework of politeness theory. Recognising these broader concerns and constraints in the analysis, the present case study focuses on the genre properties of a very limited set of texts within the petitionary colony: the petitions submitted to the authorities during the Salem witchcraft episode in the year 1692. In the study of the Salem petitions, recent research into the forms and functions of medieval English petitionary texts (especially by Gwilym Dodd) will provide a useful point of diachronic comparison.

2. The material

The primary sources comprise twenty-one documents, all written in 1692, which have been labeled as petitions in *RSWH*. In addition to providing a running number for each petition for the referential purposes of the present study, Table 1 indicates the pagination, title and date of each document, as found in *RSWH*; if the document has not been formally dated and the dating is based on external (or other kinds of internal) evidence, the date is shown within square brackets. The petitions written in 1693 or later during the long aftermath of the Salem process have not been included in this study.

The crucial filtering/mediating role of the recorders in the production of the documents needs to be borne in mind in analysing the language of the Salem records, as demonstrated effectively by Peter Grund (2007; see also Doty 2007, Hiltunen and Peikola 2007, *RSWH*

Table 1. The primary sources used in the present study

Number	Pages	Title	Date
1	399	Petition of William Milborne	[June 25]
2	413–14	Petition of Rebecca Nurse	[June 28]
3	486	Petition of John Procter from Prison	July 23
4	620	Petition of Sarah Cloyce & Mary Esty	[September 9]
5	630–31	Petition of Rebecca Fox for Rebecca Jacobs	[September 12]
6	657–58	Petition of Mary Esty	[September 15]
7	658–59	Petition of Ann Pudeator	[September 16]
8	673–74	Petition of John Hale, Nicholas Noyes, Daniel Epps Jr., & John Emerson Jr. for Dorcas Hoar	September 21
9	674	Petition of the Selectmen of Andover, Regarding the Children of Samuell Wardwell	September 26
10	687–88	Petition of John Osgood Sr., John Frye, John Marston, et al. for Their Wives & Daughters	[October 12]
11	690–91	Petition of Twenty-six Andover Men Concerning Townspeople Accused of Witchcraft	October 18
12	691–92	Petition of Thomas Hart for Elizabeth Hart	October 19
13	692–93	Petition of Nicholas Rice for Restitution for Sarah Rice	October 19
14	697–98	Petition of Ten Persons of Ipswich	[October 26]
15	698	Petition of Thomas Barrett for Martha Sparks	November 1
16	700	Petition of John Parker & Joseph Parker for Restitution for Mary Parker	November 7
17	704–05	Petition of Abigail Faulkner Sr. for a Pardon	December 3
18	705–06	Petition of Rebecca Eames for a Pardon	December 5
19	707–08	Petition of John Osgood Sr. & Seven Other Andover Residents for the Accused	December 6
20	708–09	Petition of Rebecca Fox for Rebecca Jacobs	[December 6]
21	710–11	Petition of George Herrick	December 8

2009: 65–71).² In his study of pleas submitted to the Court of Requests in Elizabethan England, Tim Stretton similarly emphasises the recording scribes’ contribution to the heavily formulaic language in the records, arguing that “the authentic voices of litigants and witnesses can be difficult to recapture, because they have passed through so many legal and institutional filters” (Stretton 1998: 16–17, 179; see also Dodd 2009: 239–240). At least in medieval petitioning it was even possible “to create fictional voices in order to project a request in its most powerful and persuasive form” (Dodd 2009: 228; cf. Burrow 1981; Ormrod 2009). In such circumstances it is likely that some linguistic choices found in the petitions investigated here represent the preferences of their recorders versed in the conventional rhetoric of the genre rather than those of the petitioners/signatories themselves. Exploring the specific relationship between these actors as regards their contributions in each of the twenty-one documents is understandably beyond the scope of this article. For the purposes of the present study, I shall use the term ‘writer’ as a supercategory which encompasses the roles of the recorders and the petitioners in the shaping of the documents and allows for the possibility that the ‘supplicatory voices’ we hear in the petitions may result from a complex interplay between these roles.

In nineteen of the documents listed in Table 1, the writers themselves use the word *petition* to provide a genre label or designation for their texts. The labels used by the writers of the remaining two documents are *request* (4) and *address* (11). On both documents, however, there is an endorsement written on their reverse by a contemporary court clerk which identifies them as petitions. A similar endorsement is also found in thirteen of those nineteen documents labelled as petitions by their writers. All twenty-one documents identified as petitions by their writers or by court clerks are explicit written requests from subordinates to superiors. *RSWH* also contains four further documents for 1692 that have been identified as petitions in their modern editorial headings, but which I have chosen to exclude from the material analysed for this paper (*RSWH* 2009: 349, 483–484, 533–534, 534–536). These documents have been written in support of individual suspect witches awaiting trial, each signed by a number of people in the local community. Although they may have implicitly functioned as requests to set free the suspect witches defended in them, they differ crucially from the documents listed in Table 1 in that no explicit requests are made in them nor are they labeled as petitions by their writers or by the court clerks who filed them. The designations *testimony* and *declaration* used in one of them (*ibid.* 534–535) and the speech act verb *testify* used in the other three to describe the action taken by their writers rather associate them with testimonies or witness depositions, whose primary communicative purpose is to provide information rather than to make a request. In contrast, it may be observed that all twenty-one petitions listed in Table 1 contain one or more speech act verbs of request or supplication, including *beg*, *beseech*, *crave*, *desire*, *entreat*, *implore*, *petition*, *plead*, *pray* and *request*; these are sometimes used formulaically in specific parts of the petition (see section 3.4).

3. Genre analysis: The move structure of the Salem petitions

3.1 *The move as an analytical concept*

In the form of genre analysis advocated by Bhatia, much influenced by the groundbreaking work of John Swales (see e.g. Swales 1990), the communicative purpose of genres is often usefully explored by analysing their cognitive macro-structure (see e.g. Bhatia 1993: 29–32). As Bhatia puts it, “[t]he idea is to interpret the regularities of organisation in order to understand the rationale for the genre” (*ibid.* 32). The key concept applied in this analysis is that of the ‘move’ – a structural unit in a text which corresponds to a particular communicative intention and which may be realised through different rhetorical strategies (*ibid.* 30). According to Bhatia, the present-day genre of the legal case for example typically follows a four-move structure: first, identifying the case; second, establishing the facts of the case; third, arguing the case and fourth, pronouncing the judgement (*ibid.* 128–136). A move can be further divided into ‘sub-moves’ or ‘steps’ (see e.g. Swales 1990: 143). In the genre of the legal case examined by Bhatia, the third move is realised through three sub-moves: (a) giving a history of the case, (b) presenting arguments and (c) deriving *ratio decidendi* (Bhatia 1993: 130).

In a study of late medieval private petitions presented in the context of the English parliament, Dodd (2007: 280–283) proposes a five-part structure for these documents – a model developed from those of Baldwin (1913) and Fisher et al. (1984). The impact of this structure for the further development of the petitionary colony in the English context is suggested by Dodd’s argument that it in fact provided “a general form which can be found in most written supplications presented in England in the late medieval period” (Dodd 2007: 280). The five parts proposed by Dodd for the private petitions comprise 1. *Address*; 2. *Identification of the petitioner*; 3. *Statement of grievance or difficulty*; 4. *Request for redress*; 5. *Appeal for remedy*. The five-part structure identified by Fisher et al. (1984: 21) in medieval English parliamentary petitions is substantially similar to

Dodd's, although parts 3–5 are named differently, as *Exposition*, *Petition* and *Valediction* respectively. Since they essentially identify communicative intentions, Dodd's macro-structural parts of the petition may be usefully approached through the Bhatian move framework.

3.2 Introductory move: Address and Identification of the petitioner/text

Comparing the parts identified by Dodd in late medieval parliamentary petitions with those found in the Salem petitions shows a considerable degree of similarity between these texts despite their chronological distance. The first two structural parts of the petitions discussed by Dodd – *Address* and *Identification of the petitioner* – may be viewed as steps of an Introductory move which identifies the communicative parties and their social relationship. These steps (here labelled a and b) also appear at the beginning of the Salem documents, usually in that order. Unlike in the material discussed by Dodd and Fisher et al., in the Salem petitions *Identification of the petitioner* also almost invariably includes a designation or brief characterisation of the kind of text the document represents. The second step of the first move could therefore be called *Identification of the petitioner/text*. The Introductory move and its steps are illustrated in examples 1–3.

- (1) ||**Move 1a**|| To his Excellency S^r William Phips Kn^t Govern^r & the Honourable Council now setting at Boston, ||**1b**|| the Humble Petition of Rebecca Fox of Cambrige (#20)
- (2) ||**1a**|| To his Exc^y S^r William Phips Kn^t Capⁿ Gen^{ell} and Governo^e in Cheife of their Maj^{ties} Province of the Massachusetts Bay in New England and to the Hon^{ed} Council thereof
||**1b**|| The Humble Petition of Thomas Barrett of Chelmsford in New England, in behalf of his Daughter Martha Sparkes wife of Henry Sparkes who is now a Souldier in their Maj^{ties} Service att the Easterne Parts, and soe hath beene for a Considerable Time (#15)
- (3) ||**1a**|| To y^e Honou^d Cou^{et} of Oryn and Terminer now sitting In Salem this 28 of June An^o 1692
||**1b**|| The humble petission of Rebecca Nurse of Salem Village// (#2)

Examples 1–3 show the usual order of these steps. The order illustrated in example 4 is a minor variant, found in five of the twenty-one documents, in which *Address* is placed after *Identification of the petitioner/text* (documents 4, 6–7, 17–18).

- (4) ||**1b**|| The humble Petition of Ann Poodeater ||**1a**|| unto y^e honoured Judge and Bench now Setting in Judicature in Salem (#7)

As in example 4, four of these five documents (6–7, 17–18) introduce *Address* with the preposition *unto* rather than the more usual *to* seen in examples 1–3. It is possible that the writers of the 1692 Salem petitions had two distinct models available to them in constructing the Introductory move – one in which the order of the steps was 1a–1b and where *Address* was introduced by means of *to*; another whose steps were ordered 1b–1a and *Address* introduced with *unto*. That the choice as regards the model to be applied may have rested with the recorder is suggested by the fact that documents 6–7 and 17–18 respectively have the same main hand.

In addition to its transparent communicative function of naming the addressee and identifying the text and the petitioner(s), the Introductory move also provided the petitioners with a conventional location to show their respect to the addressee while emphasising their own submissive stance, as expected in petitionary rhetoric (cf. Held 2010: 202–203).

A majority of the Salem petitions were addressed to the supreme legal and administrative authorities of Massachusetts in Boston, including the Governor, Council, General Assembly and General Court of the Province – either individually or in various combinations. Owing to the viceregal status of the governor in British colonies, petitioning the governor may in a sense be regarded as an act equivalent to petitioning the king or queen in Britain itself. In medieval and early modern England, subjects had what was considered to be a divine right to petition their ruler; rulers were similarly understood to have a divine obligation to respond to petitions they received from their subjects (Zaeske 2003: 12; Giancarlo 2007: 147; see also Musson 2009).

In the Introductory move of the Salem petitions, the conventional submissive/deferential discursive positioning is visible for example in the honorifics used for the addressee – a petitionary feature Held (2010: 209) succinctly characterises as “the exalting veneration of the graceful addressee”. The council, court or judge and bench addressed in examples 1–4 are *honourable* or *honoured*, and the title given to Sir William Phips (examples 1 and 2) is formal and very elaborate – especially so in document 15 (example 2). The submissive stance is also seen in the description of the petitionary text itself as *humble* in move 1b, as in examples 1–4 (cf. Dodd 2007: 282). The occurrence of this feature in sixteen of the twenty-one petitions demonstrates its conventionality (documents 1–2, 4–7, 11–20).

A material feature that may likewise have served to emphasise the submissive/deferential positioning of the petitioners has to do with the layout of the document. In the Salem petitions, the initial move is often separated from the text following it into one or two paragraphs of its own. According to instructions found in early modern epistolary manuals, the amount of space between the address (‘superscription’) and the first line of the body text of a letter could be used as an indicator of respect shown by the writer towards the recipient (e.g. Care 1671: 148; see further Nevala 2004: 99–100).³ That these manuals also often discuss features of petitions illustrates the inherent link between petitionary rhetoric and the conventions of epistolary discourse. George Brown’s *The New and Complete English Letter-Writer*, for example, includes an entire section entitled “The Universal Petitioner” (Brown s.a. [1770?]: 185–198). At the very beginning of this section, the author advises the petitioner to assume the properly humble stance: “*PETITIONS should contain a state of the petitioner’s [sic] case in the most modest terms, and then the request must be made in humility*” (ibid. 185).

3.3 Statement of grievance or difficulty (move 2)

As in Dodd’s model, the identification of the petitioner is also in most of the Salem petitions followed by *Statement of grievance or difficulty*, in which the petitioners describe the nature of the problem that they wish the addressee to redress. The beginning of the move often contains a formulaic third-person reference to the petitioner, such as “you^e Poor and humble petitioner” as in example 5. Later on in the text, however, it is common for the petitioners’ first-person voice to emerge when they describe their condition and present their supplication (see e.g. example 9 below).

Syntactically, move 2 is usually part of a very long sentence whose grammatical subject is the name of the text as identified in move 1b.

- (5) ||1b|| The humble Petition of Abigall: ffalkner ||1a|| unto his Excellencye S^r W^m Phipps knight and Gouern^e of their Majestyes Dominions in America: ||2|| humbly sheweth
That wheras you^e Poor and humble petitioner [. . .] (#17)
- (6) ||1b|| The Petition of the Select men of Andover ||2|| sheweth;
That wheras Samuel Wardwell and his wife of Andover [. . .] (#9)

- (7) ||1b|| The humble petition of vs whose names are subscribed herevnto now prisoners at Ipswich ||2|| humbly sheweth, that some of vs [. . .] (#14)

As illustrated in examples 5–7, in the Salem petitions *Statement of grievance or difficulty* characteristically opens with the verb phrase *humbly sheweth* or sometimes simply *sheweth* (i.e. ‘shows’), followed by a long clause beginning with *that whereas* or simply *that*. The verb phrase has the function, as it were, of a bridge between the Introductory move and the longer prose section that follows it (moves 2 and 3). In document 2, this function appears concretely on the manuscript page: the phrase has been formatted as a paragraph of its own and drawn towards the left-hand margin (Essex County Court Archives, vol. 1, no. 88).⁴ The verb *show*, as used in English petitionary formulae already in the late medieval period, originally had a specific technical sense in emphasising the importance of the public display of the contents of the petition (Giancarlo 2007: 140; see also *OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. *show* v. 23c). The conventional use of *humbly* probably echoes the use of the adverb *humblement* in the regular “inventory of verbal prostration” in Anglo-Norman chancery petitions (see Held 2010: 209).

3.4 Request for redress (move 3)

The next move, *Request for redress*, forms in a sense the central part of a petition, because this is where the petitioners make their plea or supplication explicit. The formal and functional distinction between *Statement of grievance or difficulty* and *Request for redress* echoes medieval ideas about the rhetoric of letter-writing (*ars dictaminis*) where a distinction was made between *narratio* and *petitio* as two structural parts of a letter; the function of the *narratio* was to narrate the circumstances leading to the presentation of the request in the *petitio* (Murphy 1974: 225; see also Held 2010: 200–201).

Possibly to emphasise its centrality, in the Salem petitions *Request for redress* is sometimes placed in a separate indented paragraph of the kind shown in example 8.

- (8) ||3|| Yo^e Poore Petition^e Earnestly and humbly Intreates Yo^e Ex^{cy} & hon^{es} to take his distressed Condition into Yo^e consideracōn And that You will please to order y^e releasem^t of his Daught^r from her confinem^t whereby shee may returne home to her poore children to Looke after them, haveing nothing to pay the charge of her confinem^t (#15)

Examples 9 and 10 illustrate the tendency for the beginning of *Request for redress* to be marked with the causal connective *therefore*. This usage highlights the internal logic of the petitionary text by presenting the move as a direct consequence of the preceding move *Statement of grievance or difficulty*.

- (9) ||2|| Most Humbly Sheweth
That Whereas your Excellency & Hon^{es} Porre Pettitioner [. . .]
||3|| Therefore I humly beseech your Hon^{es} to take my Case & Condition so fare into Consideration That I may <ha>ue [. . .] (#21)
- (10) ||2|| humbly sheweth
That [. . .]
||3|| These are therefore humbly to petition in her behalfe y^t their may be granted her [. . .] (#8)

Example 11 represents a document which does not follow the (*humbly*) *sheweth that (whereas) . . . therefore* pattern of identifying moves 2 and 3, but adopts a less formulaic way of doing so.

- (11) ||2|| We would Not Trouble Your honours w^h a Tedious diversion: but briefly spread open our distressed Condition [. . .]

||3|| having spread open our Condition: we humbly make our address. To your honoo<rs> to Grant y^t [. . .] (#10)

Here the reference to the petitioners' intention to "*briefly spread open our distressed Condition*" identifies move 2 as their statement of grievance; for move 3, the phrase "*having spread open our Condition*" functions similarly to the usual *therefore* in establishing a causal relationship between the moves and signalling to the reader that there is a shift from one communicative intention to another.

The material also indicates that it is possible for move 3 to begin directly with a request, as shown in example 12.

- (12) ||2|| humbly sheweth:
That Wheras [. . .] ||3|| I would humbly begg of yo^e honours to Take it into your
Judicious and Pious consideratiō That [. . .] (#7)

The opening of *Request for redress* contains as a rule either a speech act verb expressing a request or a corresponding noun which identifies the communicative intention of the move explicitly as petitionary. In examples 8–10 and 12, for instance, such verbs comprise *entreat*, *beseech*, *petition*, and *beg*. In example 11, the noun *address* has the specific sense of 'a formal approach to a sovereign, esp. a request, appeal, or statement of grievance; a petition' (as defined in *OED*, 3rd ed., s.v. *address* n. 2c).

When there is more than one request to be made, each resulting from a different statement of grievance, the sequence of moves 2 and 3 may be repeated for the sake of clarity of argumentation. This strategy is illustrated in example 13 from document 4 – a joint petition by two sisters, structured as three consecutive pairs of *Statement of grievance or difficulty* and *Request for redress*.

- (13) ||2|| Humbly sheweth, that whereas [. . .] ||3|| our humble request is first that [. . .]
||2|| Secondly that wheras [. . .] ||3|| we beg [Hand 2] ·{hope} [Hand 1] [. . .] ||2||
Thirdly that [. . .] ||3|| we hope [. . .] (#4)

It is worth noting that a second, coeval hand – perhaps belonging to someone associated with the processing of the document in court – changed the emphatic supplicatory verb *beg* into the wishful *hope* along with adding a few other specifications to the document (see *RSWH* 2009: 620). Whatever motivated the change, it modifies the illocutionary force of the request and would seem to distance the document at this point from conventional petitionary discourse.

3.5 Appeal for remedy (move 4)

The last structural part in Dodd's model is a short appeal at the end of the petition where God's love and the virtue of charity are invoked in a formulaic supplicatory manner. Fisher et al. (1984: 21) refer to it as *Valediction*. The English formulae for expressing the appeal in the material of both Dodd and Fisher et al. are characteristically variants of the phrase *for the love of God and deed/in way of charity* (see Dodd 2007: 283, Fisher et al. 1984: 21). As pointed out by Dodd (2007: 283–284), these petitions were primarily appeals or prayers made to royal grace, and they drew in particular on the virtue of charity traditionally associated with good lordship. According to Dodd, the appeal to the grace and charity of the ruler helps to explain why early petitionary rhetoric tends to be deeply engaged with both religious and feudal discourses.

The Salem petitions likewise usually contain a short final supplication of the kind illustrated in examples 14 and 15.

- (14) ||4|| and your poor and humble petition^e shall for euer pray as she is bound in duty for yo^e hon^{es} health and happiness in this life and eternall felicity in y^e world to come (#7)
- (15) ||4|| And yo^e Petition^{es}, as in duty bound shall ever pray &c (#19)

Rather than explicitly invoking God's love and the virtue of charity, however, in the Salem petitions *Appeal for remedy* as a rule states that the petitioners will dutifully pray for the welfare of the addressees (example 14). The move tends to be highly formulaic, as seen in example 15; here its conventional nature for the writer of the petition is concretely suggested by the way it concludes with the extender tag *et cetera*, without specifying what the petitioners will in fact pray for (see further Carroll 2008 for phraseological uses of extender tags in early English). A similar valediction with a prayer for the welfare of the addressee appears in some of the fifteenth-century parliamentary petitions edited by Fisher et al., so there seems to be a long tradition behind this trope as well. For example, at the end of squire Jany Cassons' petition from March 1423, addressed "To the kyng oure souerein lord" (i.e. the one-year-old Henry VI), the petitioner "shal euer prae for youre high estat and for al your noble lignie" (Fisher et al. 1984: 150–151).

Even if the notion of charity is not explicitly mentioned, an appeal to it seems nevertheless to be embedded in some petitionary formulae used for self-labelling. In his medieval parliamentary material Dodd notes the petitioners' tendency to invoke the idea of poverty in referring to themselves – a feature which he associates with the traditional duty of the king to give charity to the deserving poor in his realm by distributing alms to them (Dodd 2007: 286; see also Dodd 2009: 230–231). In the Salem petitions too, the petitioners are at times portrayed as deserving poor – both in *Appeal for remedy* (as in example 14) as well as in other moves (see examples 5, 8, 9). The adjective *poor* itself is used for the self-labelling of the petitioners in nine of the twenty-one documents (2, 4, 6–7, 15, 17–18, 20–21). Other adjectives used for the description of the petitioners' miserable condition that may be linked with the poverty trope include *afflicted* (3, 17), *despicable* (21), *distressed* (10, 11, 20), *infirm* (14), *mean* (15) and *weak* (14).

4. Flouting the conventions?

Our brief analysis of the moves in the Salem petitions indicates that a majority of the documents surveyed broadly follow a time-tested structure that was already used in late medieval petitions submitted in a parliamentary context. As observed, similarly to many other official legal genres, in the Salem petitions too formulaic language and predictable rhetorical conventions are often used for the realisation of the moves and in signalling a shift from one move to the next. Considering that the ultimate function of a petition is to persuade the addressee to comply with a request presented by the petitioner, it may be asked whether there is any room in these documents for rhetorical manoeuvring on the part of writers to successfully drive home their case – i.e. to what extent does the genre itself restrict the use and features of persuasive language (cf. Virtanen and Halmari 2005: 4). As Bhatia (1997) points out, different rhetorical strategies may be used to verbalise the moves of a genre, and its conventionalised elements may to a certain degree be creatively exploited or manipulated by experienced writers to advance their goals.

In general, it should be borne in mind that the space within which the petitioners had to operate was effectively constrained by the communicative setting of presenting the petition. Most importantly, the petitioners had to maintain their humble stance vis-à-vis the institutionally empowered addressees of their petition while simultaneously trying to persuade them to comply with their own requests. In his work on parliamentary petitions Dodd identifies three areas in which the petitioners could "put a positive spin on the deserving nature of their request" (Dodd 2007: 297). This could be achieved by emphasising one or

more of the following aspects: 1. the seriousness of their own situation; 2. the power or unscrupulous behaviour of their opponents; 3. the common cause between the subject of the petition and broader interests (ibid. 297–301).

Of the three strategies identified by Dodd, the first is clearly the most common one in the Salem material – namely emphasising the seriousness of the situation facing the petitioner or those being petitioned for. It may be argued that of the three strategies this is also the one which most naturally lends itself to a writer in a genre where deferential and submissive language are default features. In fact, it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish conventional formulaic expressions of humility or misery from petitioners' more genuine attempts to stress the gravity of their specific situation. In document 14, for example, the petitioners describe themselves as “*weak*” and “*infirm*”. As observed in 4.5, the use of these adjectives may be related to the poverty trope in petitionary discourse. In this document, however, the petitioners also point out that some of them “*have Lyen in the prison many monthes*” and that unless released they are “*like to perish with cold in lying longer in prison in this cold season of the year*” (RSWH 2009: 697). Moreover, some of them are stated to be “*aged either about or nere fourscore*” (ibid. 697). In this context, the use of the adjectives *weak* and *infirm* for the petitioners' self-labelling seems better interpreted in the light of their actual condition in Ipswich prison rather than a routine application of the poverty trope.

In the Salem petitions, emphasising the opponents' power and unscrupulous behaviour or character – Dodd's second strategy – is less common than the first. This finding may be related to the petitioners' reluctance to make a direct accusation or complaint against another party in a document addressed to a legal authority, as they would likely have been required to substantiate such claims in court. The less common adoption of the strategy may obviously also be related to the contents of the documents in the sense that a number of the petitions do not deal with requests where an opposing party needs to be identified. In document 14, for example, the petitioners simply request to be freed from prison; while they point out that they are not themselves conscious of being guilty, they do not accuse anyone of accusing them wrongly or imprisoning them (see RSWH 2009: 697).

There are a few cases, however, when the petitioner directly puts the blame on another party. The most outspoken of these documents is the petition of Mary Esty (#6), written after she had already been sentenced to death for witchcraft in September 1692. Examples 16–18 illustrate instances in the petition where Esty explicitly turns against her accusers and judges.

- (16) [. . .] knowing my own Innocencye Blised be the lord for it *and seeing plainly the wiles and subtilty of {my} accusers* [. . .] (#6, emphasis added by MP)
- (17) [. . .] I Question not but your honours does to the uttmmost of your Powers in the discouery and detecting of witchcraft and witches and would not be guilty of Innocent blood for the world but by my own Innocencye *I know you are in the wrong way* [. . .] (#6, emphasis added by MP)
- (18) [. . .] I Petition to your honours not for my own life for I know I must die and my appointed time is sett but the the Lord he knowes it is that if it be possible no more Innocen<t>t blood may be shed *which undoubtidly cannot be Auoydd In the way and course you goe in* [. . .] (#6, emphasis added by MP)

As examples 16 and 17 show, Mary Esty highlights the negative characteristics of her accusers and voices the conviction that the legal authorities are going about their pursuit of witches in the wrong way. A possible reason for this somewhat exceptional outspokenness may be seen in example 18, where the petitioner points out that she already knows that she must die and does not petition for her own life. If we take this literally, the implication is that Mary Esty no longer had anything to lose in speaking out. She was hanged on September 22 (see Norton 2002: 278).

Example 18 also illustrates the third rhetorical strategy identified by Dodd in his material: emphasising the general interests of the petitioners' cause and the common good it promotes. As stated in the petition, Mary Esty's primary concern is not her own survival but that no more innocent blood be shed during the trials. Among the Salem petitions, notions of the general interest and the common good are most emphatically foregrounded in the petition of the Reverend Milborne, discussed at the beginning of this article. Milborne first points out that the use of spectral evidence has been "*the womb that hath brought forth inextricable damage and miserie to this Province*" (RSWH 2009: 399). He then goes on to argue that if the addressees do as he petitions concerning the use of such evidence, not only will "*God [. . .] be glorified*" and "*their Majesties honored*", but their actions will also promote "*the Interest and welfare of the Inhabitants of ye Province*" (ibid. 399).

5. Concluding remarks

In this case study, I have explored the genre features of twenty-one petitions written during the Salem witch-trials in Massachusetts, 1692, within the theoretical framework offered by Vijay K. Bhatia. Although the primary material was small in size, conspicuous similarities could be discerned between the structure and rhetoric of these early American texts and the medieval English petitionary tradition, including the habit of some writers of testing the limits of the genre in the attempt to drive home their plea. In spite of these observed similarities, however, it would be premature to propose a direct link between the medieval tradition of parliamentary petitioning and the genre conventions found in the Salem texts. A precise account of the position of the Salem petitions in the history of the genre in English must wait until we have a much more comprehensive understanding of the features that belong to the petition as a genre colony, encompassing shared textual practices between different domains, as opposed to features limited to specific petitionary genres within individual domains. In assessing the historical development of such genres, it is important to recognise the possibility of influence from similar texts from other domains. In addition to comparing the Salem materials with other (earlier and coeval) English and early colonial judicial petitions, we should therefore also seek to compare them with supplications written for example in the contexts of legislation, epistolary correspondence or private devotion. To be in a position to understand the linguistic variation in the use of some of the formulae in the Salem petitions, we also need to analyse them with an eye on the practical instructions given to writers of petitions in the legal, notarial and epistolary manuals circulating in the American colonies at the time, and pay closer attention to the conventions adopted by different recorders. Doing so could help us for example to establish direct sources or models underlying the two different patterns for structuring the Introductory move of the petition as discussed in Section 3.2.

The Reverend Milborne's petition and the reaction it provoked (cf. Section 1) exemplifies the way in which a professional writer could exploit the conventional and formulaic structure of the genre as suggested by Bhatia and harness it to serve a political or ideological agenda. The immediate outcome of many of the Salem petitions submitted in 1692, including those of Mary Esty and the Reverend Milborne, was negative, in the sense that the petitioners' requests were not granted. We should nevertheless not dismiss the role played by the petitions received by the authorities in toto in turning general opinion against the use of spectral evidence and in putting an end to the executions of the condemned witches.

NOTES

- 1 The original version of this article was presented as a paper at the 15th International Conference of English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL), Munich, 2008, in the workshop "Speech, Text, and Discourse: The Voices of the Records of the Salem Witchcraft Trials" convened by Peter Grund and Merja Kytö. I wish to thank the conveners and the participants of the workshop as well as the anonymous referee for their valuable comments, and the Academy of Finland for supporting my research (decision number 136404).
- 2 Further research into the recorders of the Salem documents by a team consisting of Peter Grund, Margo Burns and Matti Peikola has been enabled by the Collaborative Research Seed Grant of the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, awarded for their project "Writing Practices in Early New England: An Electronic Database of the Salem Witch Trial Documents" in the spring of 2011.
- 3 For Care and types of instruction in his manual, see Tanskanen (2009).
- 4 A digitised image of the document is accessible through the *Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project* website <<http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/home.html>> (5 September 2011).

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